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ABSTRACT

In an era where the image rules and the referent fades further and further into a fond memory, the need for cultural analysis and critique becomes profoundly urgent. This paper focuses on the question: How can a specifically feminist cultural theory begin to evolve? More often than not, women are the "imaged" in this culture. However, the image of woman that is represented in magazines and on television is largely created by men. There are many varied feminist theories of representation. This paper attempts to broadly sketch the major approaches in the field and suggests possibilities for alternative positions. First, the "images" perspective is examined, where meaning is perceived as readily apparent and judged in terms of its sexist or nonsexist content and characterization. The "signification" perspective is then discussed, which posits itself overtly as an alternative to the dominant mode of cultural inquiry. Finally, a brief look is taken at the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham, England as expressing an affinity with feminist critique in its insistence on an interactional, processual, and experiential definition of culture. (JB)

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MATERIAL GIRLS:

FEMINISM AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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MATERIAL GIRLS: FEMINISM AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Suzanna Danuta Walters

This title is, of course, a reference to the pop star Madonna's hit of several years ago. Madonna is a likely starting point for a discussion of feminism and cultural theory, as she has re-created her self as image many times over - from sluttish, pouty boy toy to Marilyn Monroe glam queen to every nun's worst nightmare. Madonna's latest incarnation, after a brief and obviously half-hearted attempt at marriage, is as trendy gay girl with fellow postmodern bonvivant Sandra Bernhardt - thereby introducing lesbianism as fun into the *National Enquirer*.

This doubling-over effect of Madonna and the ambiguity of her self-presentation (is she putting us on? is she mocking the male gaze or giving in willfully to it? is she a whore or madonna or both/neither?) points to the already overdetermined status of representing woman in popular culture. In other words, it ain't easy being a girl.

In an era where the image rules and the referent fades further and further into a fond memory, the need for cultural analysis and critique becomes profoundly urgent. It can surely be no coincidence that, as this media frame grows larger and larger, encompassing more and more areas of social practice, an outpouring of cultural critique of all stripes emerges from even those formally concerned with the most orthodox of endeavors.

But where does feminism fit in? Do women have a particular relationship to cultural imagery? What, in fact, is the relationship between <u>women</u> as material, historical beings and <u>woman</u> - that contradictory and frustrating image

of ourselves that is represented in popular culture? And then, the question that concerns us here: how can we begin to develop a specifically feminist cultural theory? The question is not an idle one, nor simply resolved by the "add women and stir" method of most cultural analyses. The argument developed here - both through an examination of existing theories as well as an exploration of possible new ones - rests on a number of assumptions about the nature of feminism and its relation to cultural critique. As Annette Kuhn says:

> ...one of the major theoretical contributions of the women's movement has been its insistence on the significance of cultural factors, in particular in the form of socially dominant representations of women and the ideological character of such representations, both in constituting the category 'woman' and in delimiting and defining what has been called the 'sex/gender' system.[1]

Indeed, feminist critics have been quick to point out that the representation of <u>women</u> in this media saturated society is particularly fraught with contradictions and dilemmas. For it is women who more often than not are the "imaged" in our culture. In this society of the spectacle, it is women's bodies that <u>are</u> the spectacle upon which representation occurs. Yet women are in this strange and unique position of also being spectators, consumers of their very own image, their very own objectification. At the same time that we witness our own representation, we are also denied a place in that process of representation, we are denied a voice, so that more often than not, those images of ourselves that stare at us from the glossy pages of the women's magazines or from the glowing eye of the tv screen are not of our own creation. They are, in more senses than one, truly "man-made."

It is no accident, then, that the feminist project has - right from the beginning - been deeply concerned with "the cultural"; even the first, founding texts of this "second wave" of feminism (Betty Friedan on women's magazines, Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir on fiction) delved into the ways in which the everyday objects of cultural consumption are as much a part of the maintenance of patriarchal social relations as are the inequities of a sexist workplace.

The attempt of this paper is not to provide a comprehensive review of these many and varied feminist theories of representation. Rather, it is to sketch out broadly the major approaches in the field and to begin to suggest possibilities for alternative positions. To grossly oversimplify (something which has become rather acceptable in an intellectual era that has declared without irony the end of the social) there have been two primary strands in feminist thinking and theorizing on representation and popular culture. These approaches have vastly different social histories, one deriving largely from sociological and empirical communications research, and the other cohering around a whole different set of assumptions and preoccupations that might be called a "post-marxist" or even a "post-structuralist" problematic.[2] I argue here that these two positions - although seemingly in opposition - in fact have more in common than either would care to admit, particularly as concerning their theorization of the relationship between culture and social relations.

First, I examine what I term the "images" perspective, where meaning is perceived as readily apparent and judged in terms of its sexist, or

non-sexist, content and characterization. This position is shown to be both limited politically by its liberal assumptions, and intellectually by its reflection model of cultural production and consumption. While it has often provided useful data and stressed the necessity of empirical research, it remains locked into an overly simplistic understanding of the uses of the mass media. This approach has largely been superceded by the critical tools of semiotics, structuralism and psychoanalysis, yet it remains important both as a counterpoint to later work and in relation to the development of differing models of communications research.

I then discuss what I will call the "signification" perspective which posits itself overtly as an alternative to the dominant mode of cultural inquiry. While this position is shown to have numerous advantages over the previous one - particularly in its recognition of the interactive and necessarily unstable nature of the production of meaning - it falls into some of the same difficulties as does the images approach, in their shared evacuation of social relations.

Finally, I look briefly at the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England as expressing an "affinity" with feminist critique, in its insistence on an interactional, processual, and experiential definition of culture. Although this model should not be adopted wholesale, it does offer interesting possibilities for the development of feminist cultural studies. This "third way" entails an engagement with "material girls" in the context of a theory that starts from a feminist standpoint and proceeds with its intellectual borrowings with care and caution.

Adjusting the Set: the "images" approach

The first perspective is often characterized as the "images" or "roles" approach. Typically discussed under the general heading of "sex-role research in the mass media", this type of work has its origins both in early feminist critique (Friedan and Millet for example) as well as more mundane, sociologically oriented communications research. Taking as its object of analysis the "images of women" in the mass media, researchers have explored sexism and sex-role stereotyping in a wide variety of media forms, including television, film, comic books, newspapers and others. Typically, the perspective is:

> ...based on content analyses designed to measure certain aspects of a media message (e.g. how many male to female characters; what types of behavior patterns do female characters exhibit as compared with male characters) and its results tend to remain at the descriptive level.[3]

Researchers are concerned with documenting the existence of sexism in the mass media, either through the study of the "effects" of sexism in the media on audiences (particularly children), or through content analyses that seek to record the content of particular media phenomenon as it relates to women.

Methodologically, the commitment is firmly to quantitatively based content and effects studies, themselves embedded within the tradition of American positivist sociology. That early feminist researchers turned first to content analysis is not surprising. In attempting to expose male dominance to an audience used to ideologies of equality and "equal representation," early researchers turned to a methodology both readily available and helpful in charting sexism and stereotypical imagery. Indeed, even early feminist

scholars outside of the communications field such as Kate Millet and Betty Friedan, analyzed literature and women's magazines, respectively, in a manner similar to content studies, albeit with more sensitivity towards the role of ideology.

Thus, studies within this "images" perspective regale us with facts and figures on the portrayal of women in the mass media. So, for instance, we find out that "Comparative analysis thus verifies that men and women are presented differently in advertising and that each sex is still shown in traditional roles.",[4] or, as Gaye Tuchman says in *Hearth and Home* (the pre-eminent exemplar of this approach):

> The mass media perform two tasks at once. First, with some culture lag, they reflect dominant values and attitudes in society. Second, they act as agents of socialization, teaching youngsters in particular how to behave. Watching lots of television leads children and adolescents to believe in traditional sex roles: Boys should work; girls should not. The same sex-role stereotypes are found in the media designed especially for women. They teach that women should direct their hearts toward hearth and home.[5]

Early feminist researchers therefore worked largely within the dominant framework of a quantitative, content-based methodology, focusing on the enumeration of stereotypical images and the overall dominance of men both in the media images themselves, as well as in the media industry. In this sense, then, early feminist research can be seen as a classic case of the "woman question" being tacked on to an already existing framework of analysis.

Yet a significant difference remains. For these early researchers were not producing their work in a social vacuum; quite to the contrary, in fact. Not coincidentally, the burgeoning of "sex-role research in the mass media" occurred simultaneously with the explosion and growth of the women's movement

on to the social and cultural scene. All of a sudden, the issues of stereotypes and biases, misrepresentation and invisibility took on new and potent meanings. The society was clearly changing, and these changes affected communications researchers in two fundamental ways.

In the first place, a contribution could be made to the process of consciousness-raising by documenting sexism and male dominance where previously these issues had been ignored or resisted. For example, studies by the newly formed National Organization for Women helped to point out the prevalence of stereotypes and sexist imagery in the context of a broader campaign for increased political awareness. And, secondly, researchers could attempt to track the relationship between this new social movement and the mass media: Were new, "positive" images being created? Was there a backlash to the women's movement? Did the media reflect the new demographics and include working women in its repertoire of socially-acceptable portrayals? And was the movement itself being systematically ignored by the mainstream press and news agencies?

For Gaye Tuchman, in her much referenced article on "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," the verdict on these questions is painfully clear. Reviewing the research in the field, Tuchman concludes that the mass media maintains sex-role stereotyping even in the face of a changing social reality in which women are increasingly active in the work force and are beginning to define themselves not only as wives and mothers, but as workers as well. Tuchman understands this in terms of a "culture lag" between the mass media's portrayal of women and the reality of life for women in contemporary society.

Tuchman and others thus at least attempted to study the portrayals of women in the emerging social context of feminism. While their methods and findings are highly problematic, as we will later discuss, their concern with giving the women's movement a "fair shake" in the mass media were genuine and important.

These early studies therefore describe the persistence of sexist imagery and the relegation of women (who are consistently underrepresented) to a limited set of roles largely defined within the world of the family and the home. We are told how many women are portrayed in positions of domesticity and submission (a lot) and how many are portrayed in positions of power and authority (not many). These limited and stereotyped roles are argued to be at odds with the changing reality of American society and, in fact, are "... preparing youngsters for a world that no longer exists."[6]

When theorists of this sort do venture beyond the head-counting, descriptive level, their remedies are often prescriptive, urging tv execs and government officials alike to institute policy changes that both put more women in the media business as well as portray them in more "accurate" and less stereotyped ways. This prescriptive focus assumes an understanding of the media as "gatekeepers" of public opinion and further locates those gatekeepers as predominantly white men. In keeping with this emphasis on the gatekeeping role of media professionals, there is also an examination of the relationship between the male hegemony of the consciousness industries and the sexist content of the images produced.

The Problem with Images

This kind of analysis has recently come under systematic attack from a variety of feminist and non-feminist quarters alike.[7] Many of the assumptions made by the "image" analysts are clearly problematic when put in the context of recent theories that problematize the subject and that challenge the correspondence theory of truth upon which much of the images approach rests:

> The very concept 'image' assumes the media can somehow directly reflect 'reality' rather as if they were a mirror on the world. This view of the media inevitably leads to dismay and affront if the media 'falsify,' 'omit' and 'distort' - i.e.create 'unrealistic' images of women (King and Stott, 1977; Ed. Tuchman, 1978; Friedan, 1963; Epstein, 1978; Weibel, 1977 and others).[8]

The assumption here is that there exists - somewhere out there in the world - a "real" woman who can be revealed to us through imagery if only the false, negative, inaccurate, untrue imagery is stripped away:

> The term implies a juxtaposition of two separable elements - women as a gender or social group versus representations of women, or a real entity, women,opposed to falsified, distorted or male views of women. It is a common misconception to see images as merely a reflection, good or bad, and compare 'bad' images of women (glossy magazine photographs, fashion advertisements etc) to 'good' images of women ('realist' photographs of women working, housewives, older women, etc).[9]

Media images are seen as having a direct and unmediated relationship with the "reality" they either distort or reflect. The mirror that media hold up to the world can be either undistorted and clear, or fractured and fuzzy, but it is a mirror nonetheless. The images model thus posits either a reflection hypothesis (the media reflect a sexist society and/or the interests of male media professionals) or a socialization hypothesis (the media teach us sex-stereotyped roles and behaviors). In either case, while there is a common-sense truth to

these assertions, meaning is still seen as "read off" the images themselves in a direct, coherent and uncontradictory way.

In many ways, this position aligns itself with a liberal-feminist political practice and with a positivist methodology, "Centered procedurally around the content analysis of gendered representation, it failed to address the larger social and cultural structures through which gender had meaning...."[10] "Images of women" often ends up being nothing more than a head counting - both in terms of numbers of women presented and prevalence of stereotypes. We seldom learn anything new from these studies because they very rarely examine the complex relationship between the images of women and the social structure in which those images are imbedded:

> ...it assumes that images are directly absorbed by the viewer, that each image is immediately readable and meaningful in and of itself, regardless of its context or of the circumstances of its production, circulation, and reception. Viewers, in turn, are presumed to be at once historically innocent and purely receptive, as if they too existed in the world immune from other social practices and discourses, yet immediately susceptible to images, to a certain power of iconism, its truth or reality effect.[11]

This images approach thus assumes a one-way flow between image and viewer, with the image "acting on" the viewer by prescribing roles and behaviors to the largely unspecified and undifferentiated "receiver" of the cultural message. The response to "false" images is thus a surface one that seeks to set right a skewed situation by altering the images themselves (more *Cagney and Lacey* less *Dynasty*) without questioning the complex configuration that exists between image, social relations and viewer.

The examination of "images of women" also forgoes any analysis of the role of ideology in constructing meaning and curtailing dissent; meanings are seen

as readily apparent (true or false) and not perceived as ideological constructions that more often than not mystify the cultural consumer. And in ignoring the social context in which the image is created (a social context which includes the specificity of the media practice itself), this approach conveniently avoids any discussion of either patriarchy or capitalism, preferring instead to use the obsolete and functionalist term "sex-roles." Similarly, the focus on stereotypes - while important - fails to address their social origin and thus ignores the most interesting aspect of the analysis of stereotypes: how is it that they have meaning for us? Stereotypes work only because they must, in some way, speak to at least perceived "real" attributes or qualities; their ideological effectivity is based on the experience of them as not simply "erroneous" or "false" but rather as structurally reinforced ideological forms of repression.[12]

For all its problems, the "images" approach does have a certain political effectivity, as discussed earlier. By pointing out consistent representational patterns and stressing their negative effect on female development and sense of self-worth, feminist communications researchers have been able to argue for changes within media institutions. Nevertheless, this approach remains highly problematic, both on its own terms and in relation to the new approaches elaborated below.

Representing Difference: the "signification" approach

In response to this "images" perspective, many theorists began to develop alternative analyses of the representation of women. Deriving their intellectual currency largely from the French avant-garde, these theorists

developed ways of looking at and analyzing imagery that called on lacanian psychoanalysis, semiotics, discourse theory, etc., all of which has been rather roughly characterized as falling within the rubric of poststructuralism. Although these positions vary widely, they all take issue with the basic assumptions of their predecessors: they all problematize the subject and contest the idea that there exists a "real" object out there in the world that the cultural image - however mediated - refers to:

> ...as long as feminist theories of ideologies work with a theory of representation within which representation is always a representation of reality, however attenuated a relation that may be, the analysis of sexual difference cannot be advanced because reality is always already apparently structured by sexual division, by an already antagonistic relation between two sexual groups....[13]

These other perspectives, rather than examining cultural imagery as reflections (or mis-reflections) of "reality," study what is often termed the "process of signification.":

> A theoretical examination of the media in terms of their signifying process means understanding that depictions of 'social reality' are mediated by a signifying mode with its own specific structures and determinations.[14]

This position has been most thoroughly taken up by feminist film criticism.

The examination of the "signifying process" through which women are represented in images entails a number of serious departures from the examination of images of women. In the first place, "woman" herself is problematized:

> ...one is posing a specificity not only to 'image' but also to 'woman.' Here indicating both a content - objectively, images of women - and as well, suggesting that the form of representation of women has implications for that representation in a way that is not simply reducible to an ideological reading/critique ie sexism.[15]

What signification theorists claim is that the entire cultural notion of "woman" is itself constructed in and through images rather than somehow "residing" in the images themselves: "Where photography takes woman as its subject matter, it also constructs 'woman' as a set of meanings which then enter cultural and economic circulation on their own accord."[16] The media "text" itself situates the spectator in a masculine or feminine subject position; it constructs sexual difference rather than simply reflecting it. And they stress that the particular medium has specific and highly developed codes for representing women, so that, for instance, certain kinds of film shots and even genres are seen as constructing woman as the object of the male gaze, as a spectacle for male sexuality. For feminist film theorists, this recognition has entailed a thorough interrogation of the film practices of the classic Hollywood narrative. From this we get the notion of "reading against the grain" where films are "read" for their absences and ruptures in an attempt to reveal the internal contradictions and produce a reading or interpretation that challenges both the dominant reading of the film as well as its coherency and closure. Teresa De Lauretis sums up this new project of feminist film criticism, and she is worth quoting at length:

> Feminist film theory, meanwhile, has gone well beyond the simple opposition of positive and negative images, and has indeed displaced the very terms of that opposition through a sustained critical attention to the hidden work of the apparatus. It has shown, for instance, how narrativity works to anchor images to non-contradictory points of identification, so that 'sexual difference' is ultimately reconfirmed and any ambiguity reconciled by narrative closure. The symptomatic reading of films as filmic texts has worked against such closure, seeking out the invisible subtext made of the gaps and excess in the narrative or visual texture of a film, and finding there, concurrent with the repression of the female's look, the signs of her elision from the text. Thus, it has been argued, it is the elision of woman that is represented in the film, rather than a positive or negative images; and what the

> representation of woman <u>as</u> image, positive <u>or</u> negative, achieves is to deny women the status of subjects both on the screen and in the cinema.[17]

Clearly, this type of analysis is concerned (at least theoretically) with the place of the viewer, or spectator, in the process of constructing meaning:

> ...'meaning' in the image is notoriously unstable and highly dependent on <u>interpretation</u> ie what the reader brings to the image rather than what the image constructs for the reader....images have no 'necessary' meanings except as produced in the process of viewing/reading and that this production always exists both within the image and between the image and larger signifying systems, for instance the advert within advertising....[18]

Feminist signification theorists have objected to a model of meaning-making that sees meaning as "read-off" the images themselves in a direct, coherent, and uncontradictory way. In other words, they critique the images work for negating the role of the spectator in constructing meaning; an image simply "means" something (determined by its characterization and content) which then is unproblematically "picked up" by the viewers. If meaning, on the other hand, is seen as fundamentally unfixed and having no assumed referent, then the construction of meaning becomes a complex and many-layered project, "Meanings do not reside in images, then: they are circulated between representation, spectator and social formation."[19]

Many feminists have also taken issue with the reformist strategy suggested by the prescriptive focus of early "image" critics, a strategy that falls into the same problems as liberal feminist politics and theory. "More women" or "better images" will not fundamentally challenge the patriarchal ways of seeing embedded within the process of representation. To argue for less stereotyped

images avoids an attack on the deep structures of the signifying practices which produce those images in the first place. It also avoids an attack on the larger social context of patriarchy in which those image-making systems are embedded. In addition, a reformist strategy implies that by changing the images themselves you will have changed the reception of them; that "positive images" means that little girls will be socialized in "better" and less sexist ways. This assumes a simple one-way flow that completely ignores any role for the audience/spectator in producing meaning in an interaction with the image. One strategy of "better images" - getting more women in the media industries - also elides the distinction between "women" and "feminist": will more women in the media institutions necessarily produce more feminist images?

Central to this shift, then, was a new concern with the productiveness of images. If images of women were no longer to be seen as simple reflections (or mis-reflections) of "real" women, then feminists had to develop a new analysis that stressed how representations actually construct sexual difference, rather than simply reflect it. The question then becomes not so much what sexist images are produced, but how they are produced and thus come to have meaning for us. One can thus broadly characterize this as a shift from a "images of women" approach to a critical practice that stresses the constructedness of "woman" as image or woman as "sign." Whereas in the previous paradigm of feminist cultural criticism, "woman" herself was taken to be unproblematic, this new work argues that the representation of women in a patriarchal culture entails a split between real, social women and "woman" as image constructed for male desire; woman as sexual spectacle. In other words, they are claiming that it is very difficult, and perhaps impossible, to represent women (here meaning actual, embodied women)

within patriarchy, and that we instead have to reckon with that which is represented: "woman" as sign, as image, as spectacle. This "woman/women" distinction has proved central to the feminist analysis of culture, but remains a quite difficult and problematic construct.

Material Girls: towards a feminist cultural theory

I think that the two positions briefly outlined above are not as dissimilar as they initially appear. Fundamentally, both perspective evade, avoid, and generally circle around this important question of the relationship between woman as image and women as material, living social actors.

While feminist critics of representation have progressed a great deal from the simplistic outlook of the "images" perspective, serious problems remain. One would expect feminist film theory to articulate a decidedly woman-centered framework for the analysis of cultural phenomena. Yet this discourse of signification, drawing as it does so fundamentally from Lacanian psychoanalysis and linguistic and semiotic models, often seems more engaged with detailing the internal system of "filmic texts" then with advancing any feminist project of demystification. In struggling to make apparent the difference between "women" as real historical beings and "woman" as she is constructed in and through the male gaze, the former is often lost, or at the very least held in perpetual suspension.

This is another way of posing a rather sensitive question: where is the feminism in feminist film theory? This is not meant facetiously or to demean or belittle the theoretical practice of these scholars, but I have often found myself - while reading one of these texts - wondering when I would come to the

feminist part. For even while a great many of these feminist film theorists claim to make the distinction between "woman" and "women" and say they're interested in delineating the relationship between the two, they never seem to get to women qua women. For if there is not a "real" or "true" image of "woman", there is - after all is said and done - real flesh and blood women out there in the world. Yes, Virginia, there <u>is</u> a referent.

But why are <u>women</u> so absent in feminist film criticism? It seems to me that the reasons are many and varied. Clearly, the absence of women in the discourse of feminist film criticism must have something to do with the formalistic tendencies of most of that work. Talking about "women" would entail a social and historical analysis that breaks out of the formal and ahistoric categories of most current talk of the "signifying process." The notion of "signifying system" - especially in film theory - tends to become a self-enclosed, overly formalistic mechanism for detaching the celluloid from the social. The only historicity we can find is the historicity of the film practice itself, stripped away from the social practices from which it emerged. As Michele Barrett puts it, "...in so far as a knowledge of real social relations is denied, it must follow that discourse itself must be the site of struggle. We do not seek a cultural revolution; we seek a revolution in discourse."[20]

It seems deeply contradictory for feminist film theorists (for example) to consistently avoid discussion of <u>women</u> while speaking eloquently of the construction of <u>woman</u> in and through representation. And again, if it has always been a patriarchal strategy to represent woman as image, as symbol, as metaphor for male desire (as the feminist film critics so thoroughly point out) then it behooves us to do more than reiterate this point (woman as lack, as absence, as

signifier). While delineating the workings of patriarchy as its constructs woman as signifier is vital - and a first step towards any critical cultural analysis - it becomes vacant when the relationship between "woman" and Women" is forever held in abeyance.

For both the "image" theorists engaged in content analysis and the "signification" theorist engaged in textual analysis, the media text becomes reified: the text becomes the beginning and end of cultural critique, both the subject and object of analysis. In doing this, both "sides" avoid the specificity of the audience member. In the psychoanalytic work, she is either presumed male or, more generally, positioned by the workings of the text and the generic psychic patterns of the implied spectator. Similarly, the "images" work either ignores the viewer altogether (eg content studies) or renders her generic and anonymous in the haze of numbers that pour forth from the effects studies. In either case, the specificity of the female viewer in terms of race, class, sexual preference, national identity, etc., is overlooked, rendering her either absent or implied by the textual operations. If she is assumed positioned by the workings of the text (as in the Lacanian work), she is seen to enter that darkened room as if she were somehow a blank slate, unformed, empty, waiting absently to be hailed into her subjectivity by the over eager Oedipal effect.

This evacuation of social relations - shared by both groups of critics - means that the historicity of media images is denied or, at the very least, attenuated. Cultural criticism, in both these forms of analysis, prefers to position itself as an island, a world unto itself. The social context of the production, distribution and reception of certain images is thus largely ignored.

If the discourse of feminist film criticism is itself embedded within a larger discourse that we may call post-structuralism, then we may do well to question the politics of post-structuralism. But let us go back to the referent, and think this question of post-structuralism and politics through the eyes of women, embodied women, women who have historically been denied their subjectivity. We may wonder, then, about what a politics that posits no referent has to offer women. It seems both dangerous and unwise for women to accept the concept of the loss of the subject, the demise of the referent. It is quite easy to whistle a fond farewell to the subject when one is assured that, after all, one <u>is</u> one (white men, for example), or, as Tania Modleski so succinctly puts it: "The death of the social is another of phallocentrism's masks, likewise authorizing the 'end of woman' without consulting her...."[21] It is rather like finding out that the landlord has changed the locks to your apartment just when you got a fresh new set made.

In an ironic sort of way, signification theorists - with all their emphasis on heterogeneity and plurality, excess and transgression - seem to posit an almost Weberian ideal type in referring to the spectator. Real social differences - of class, of race, of sexual preference, of ethnicity - are erased in the ideal type categories of masculine and feminine subject positions and constructions of desire.

> The viewing subject has to a certain extent displaced the social audience - both as object of knowledge and site of social transformation. Heterogeneity has been invoked as a conceptual tool to put the subject in crisis - the viewing subject....But one gains the impression that the audience...has assumed an unquestioned homogeneity in part guaranteed by unanimous agreement that the subject must be put in crisis, decentered, thus ironically ensuring a very safe, central and functional place to the concept of the subject as an imaginary category. An assault on the ideological concept of audience...has resulted in a retreat from the social.[22]

While "women" are avoided, "femininity" and the "feminine" are constantly evoked. But, femininity does not "equal" women, although it is clearly a part of the construction of a female identity. And again, "femininity" evoked as an all-encompassing, transhistorical term to describe the condition of women under patriarchy avoids a more nuanced and detailed discussion of different "femininities" and other forms of female behavior that perhaps don't neatly fit into that category. Thus, once again, the specificity of the reader/spectator - a specificity which is theorized and stressed in their discourse - is effectively denied in their critical practice.

Here too, the reliance on a psychoanalytic framework for analysis (mostly Lacanian these days), relegates the complex social practice of representation to a few grand metaphors. It is a problem for women when "Oedipal" becomes the dominant metaphor through which our relationship to representation is defined. The production of sexual difference does occur in representation, but to locate it so narrowly within timeless psychic processes is to evade both the social construction of difference as well as the heterogeneity of differences present in any given audience. The use of the Oedipal metaphor as a sort of grand signifier of the workings of representation, particularly as it relates to narrative, loses sight of the social constructedness of the Oedipal conjuncture itself.

In examining the work of the signification theorists, there is also the question of accessibility, a question conveniently overlooked in most cutting edge discourse but one which feminists can clearly not afford to ignore. In the rush to keep up with the newest in "post"- thought, cultural critique (once again) finds itself inaccessible to even the most forward thinking of the

general public. And it seems to me that cultural criticism, more than any other method of critical thought, must struggle to make itself known. For if the image so often mystifies and degrades us, our criticism of that same image should not - must not - participate in further mystification. If the point of cultural analysis is to demystify, to make available alternative and oppositional reading of cultural objects that often appear transparent to us in their simplicity and innocuousness, then it hardly serves our purpose to regale ourselves with endless speculations on the floating signifier and musings on the impossibility of reading. If we want to reveal the ideological agenda or agendas that are often inscribed in a cultural text, then to use language and analysis that is deeply inaccessible, severely jargon-laden, is only to further mystify and further remove those objects from the comprehension and control of those consumers who they are aimed at.

Clearly, too, this question of accessibility is a particularly troubling one for feminists. If part of the feminist project has always been to ground theory and knowledge in the actual and felt experiences of women, and to avoid the kind of universalizing that has historically been used to exclude the female voice, then a theoretical practice that is weighted with jargon occupies a suspicious place within feminist theory.

But if these two positions (the "image" perspective and the "signification" approach), while interesting and illuminating to a great extent, still remain inadequate to the project of developing a feminist cultural theory or standpoint, then what may be suggested in their stead? My criticisms of both the image and the signification theorists suggests a direction, although an admittedly unmapped one. Clearly, I don't think a return to the quantitative

and descriptive approach of the early researchers on images of women in the mass media is a valuable way to address the problems raised by my critique of the signification theorists. And yet I also don't believe that the latter position needs simply to be deepened, or even politicized, for my criticisms to become moot. What we need, I think, is a feminist cultural criticism that has the theoretical sophistication of the second position - a position that is deeply critical of the dominant representations of women - but that is informed by a committed feminist praxis. If feminism is a way of understanding the world, then shouldn't theories of culture - while of course borrowing from a variety of perspectives - develop fundamentally from <u>feminism</u>, particularly in terms of methodology? This is not to say that feminist cultural theorists shouldn't engage with semiotics or other methods of decoding cultural objects, but that these approaches should be used to enhance <u>feminist</u> cultural theorizing, rather than the other way around. In other words, in arguing for a feminist <u>cultural</u> theory (not necessarily in opposition to a feminist film theory, or a feminist analysis of advertising, or a feminist theory of tv, but perhaps <u>inclusive</u> of them) I am suggesting that feminism has the analytic power to act as a significant decoder of the cultural products of late capitalism.

Indeed, I am going even further, in suggesting that women's unique position vis-a-vis mass culture (as both subject and object, as the one defined against that which she is not: "Man", as the body through which difference is produced) renders feminism <u>as a standpoint</u>[23] privileged access to the arduous process of demystification and subversive interpretation. The implication here is that we start with feminism (instead of psychoanalysis, semiotics, etc) and move from there. Studies <u>across</u> different media are thus of the utmost importance, as the

common denominator becomes not the particulars of the "signifying system" but the patriarchal structures of representation as they cohere to create dominant "structures of feeling."

Clearly, then, I am calling for not simply a new <u>focus</u>, but rather a new conceptualization of what the project of feminist cultural criticism can be. I think the work emanating from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham[24] can begin to offer us ways to think of the project of cultural studies that avoids the rigid and limiting orthodoxies of various reflection hypotheses as well as struggles against the dangers of a post-structuralist no politics.

British cultural theory represents a body of work that has been characterized by its persistent intervention upon Marxism and its struggle to develop a conceptualization of culture that does not succumb to either economic reductionism or a hazy, all-inclusive idealism. This attempt at reconceptualization has necessitated an interaction with orthodox marxism as well as the marxist traditions embodied in the work of the Frankfurt School, Gramsci, Althusser, and the whole of what has come to be known as "western marxism." What has emerged out of this process of critique and analysis is an ambitious and not unproblematic attempt at synthesis - taking insights culled from a variety of traditions both inside marxism (Marx and Engels, Althusser, Gramsci, Lukacs, etc.) and outside it (semiotics, Barthes, Lacanian psychoanalysis, film theory, post-structuralism).

In response to both pessimistic Frankfurt School mass culture theory and the "hypodermic model" of most early American communications studies, the Birmingham perspective offers a series of arguments, empirical studies, and

theoretical conceptualizations that are explicitly anti-reductionist in both method and tone. The search here is for an analysis of popular culture that sees both the moments of resistance and containment, the contradictory and dialectical movements of domination and subversion. The field of "culture" then - both in its more institutionalized forms in the mass media and in its less formal, local manifestations - is seen as a highly contested terrain of transformations and mediations. In its continuous re-thinking of the Marxian project, this interdisciplinary perspective can offer feminists new ways of conceptualizing the relationship between marxism and feminism, the previous discussion of which has produced a nowhere debate on the (unhappy) marriage of marxism and feminism - an unfortunate metaphor to be sure.

The Birmingham approach to cultural studies thus originally appeared to me as the panacea for the twin evils of economistic Marxism and esoteric intellectualism, but also seemed deeply appropriate to what has since been called the "postmodern condition." It is, however, not without its problems. While I often felt there was an intellectual affinity between the British Marxist cultural theory and feminism in their shared emphases on "lived experience" and their commitment to releasing the muted and suppressed voices of those typically seen as somehow "outside" culture, nevertheless the emphasis remained resolutely class-based, with "women" or "girls" occasionally grafted on to and already established cultural framework.[25] The insights of feminism were often mentioned but rarely served to transform either the methodology or the choice of cultural objects to be analyzed.

Yet the affinity remains. Indeed, Janice Radway's work on women romance readers[26] is a unique attempt to develop this affinity in critical feminist

practice. Radway's subjects (much like the male working-class subjects of much Birmingham work) are neither duped consumers of cultural commodities nor are they simply enjoying themselves "innocently." Her attempt to integrate the critical and ethnographic impulses of Birmingham with a thorough feminist politics points to a quite interesting set of research possibilities for feminist cultural critics. This perspective can begin to provide us with ways of actually thinking about and <u>doing</u> cultural studies. Ethnographic research is certainly nothing new in the social sciences, but it does have a limited tradition in terms of the analysis of mass media and popular culture. Most of the empirical work done in cultural studies has, until recently, been quantitative and informed by conservative social theory.

British cultural studies has consistently produced work that is deeply committed to an examination of how people actually experience their own cultural life. In simple terms, they actually look at <u>people</u> - a daring thing to do in an intellectual milieu that has boldly declared the end of social relations. But, more importantly, this ethnographic impulse is informed by a sustained and developed political sensibility, so that the studies have the richness and vitality that only an engagement with actual lived experience can produce.

In this regard, an emphasis on some sort of (non-empiricist) empirical research might be part of the project, particularly if one attempts to turn the feminist phrase "the personal is political" into a methodological principle. Methodologically, this would entail a move away from the focus on either the isolated text or the aggregate viewer, and a move towards an engagement with the lived experience of actual women, an engagement with "material girls." This does not, to be sure, mean a move towards the reconstitution of the "unified subject"

who speaks the "truth" of her experience. If postmodernism has shown us anything, it is the mirage of the intact subject. But moving towards material girls might rather mean a shift in our methodological focus away from the text (or the individual subject) as the speaker of truth and towards a more plural and heterogenous examination of the multiplicity of forces and practices that construct, as Raymond Williams would have it, a "structure of feeling." To put it simply (in a way that seems decidedly old-fashioned and retro in this era of "the end of history/ideology/the social) I am arguing for a feminist cultural criticism that rigorously places its cultural objects in a social and historical context, and attempts to make connections between cultural instances and ideological hegemony. This seems to me a direction feminist cultural theory must move in, if it is to take seriously its desire to demystify dominant cultural products and to help construct a liberatory and expressive feminist culture.

To paraphrase Marx: up until now, cultural critics have been content to read a text; the point however, is to write a new one.

ENDNOTES

1. Annette Kuhn, Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 4.

2. Clearly, I am simplifying and unifying these diverse positions for the sake of expediency. In fact, there are serious differences within the "signification" perspective, differences that often have to do with the extent to which a commitment to a marxist or materialist framework is retained. Post-structuralism is a hopelessly inadequate and fragmented term to cover the range of positions here. Recently, the term "cine-feminism" has been used to characterize a practice focused on questions of the cinema as a signifying apparatus within which issues of genre, style, and the production of sexual difference figure heavily.

3. Helen Baehr, "The Impact of Feminism on Media Studies - Just Another Commercial Break?" in Men's Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines (New York: Pergamon Press/The Athene Series, 1981), 146.

4. Linda Busby, "Sex-role Research on the Mass Media," Journal Of Communication vol.25, no. 4 (Autumn 1975): 110.

5. Gaye Tuchman, et al, eds., Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media (new York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 37.

6. Tuchman, Hearth and Home, 6.

7. See Busby and Baehr, op cit., and Communications 9 (April 1986).

8. Baehr, 148.

9.Griselda Pollock, "What's Wrong With Images of Women?" Screen 24 (Autumn 1977): 26.

10. Ellen Wartella and Paula A. Treichler, "Interventions: Feminist Theory and Communication Studies," Communication vol. 9, no. 1 (April 1986): 5.

11. Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 1986), 38.

12. T.E. Perkins, "Rethinking Stereotypes," in Ideology and Cultural Production, ed. Michele Barrett et al., (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 136-138.

13. Parveen Adams, "A note on the distinction between sexual division and sexual differences," m/f 4 (1979): 52.

14. Baehr, 150.

15. Elizabeth Cowie, "Women, Representation and the Image," Screen Education 23 (Summer 1977): 19.

16. Kuhn, 19.

17. de Lauretis, 57-58.

18. Cowie, 17-18.

19. Kuhn, 7.

20. Barrett, 72.

21. Tania Modleski, "Femininity as Mas(s)querade: a feminist approach to mass culture," in Colin McCabe, ed., High Theory/Low Culture: analysing popular television and film (New YorK: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 51.

22. Leslie Stern, "Feminism and Cinema: exchanges," Screen 20, nos. 3/4 (1979-80): 89-90.

23. The term "standpoint" is used deliberately here, as one of the problems I see is the wide gap between feminist social theory (indicated here by the work of Nancy Hartsock and the concept of "standpoint") and feminist cultural theory. One of the issues that needs to be addressed precisely concerns this gap and how to creatively bridge it.

24.The history of the CCCS in its negotiations both with traditional academic life as well as with the theoretical grab-bag proffered with the New Social Movements of the 60s and 70s is a long and contested one. While there is no single "Birmingham School," the development has been characterized by certain central debates and issues, not least amongst them the question of structuralism and the "relative autonomy" of culture, a la Althusser. For solid introductions to these debates see especially Richard Johnson, "What is Cultural Studies Anyway,? Social Text 16 (Winter 1986/87); Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: two paradigms," Media, Culture and Society 2 (1980); and Centre texts such as Hall et al Culture, Media and Language (London: Hutchinson, 1980) and Hall et al Resistance Through Rituals (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

25. See especially Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, "Girls and Subculture," in Resistance Through Rituals ed Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

26. Janice Radway, Reading The Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984).